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ABSTRACT

The state of the motion picture industry is reviewed, focusing on needed change in the practice of product placement. The study of the placements of advertising in films should be of interest to the student of visual literacy. Product placers are using films to advertise their products to entertainment seekers. The viewer, often a child, may not be aware that the products featured are being advertised. The director is no longer the person in charge of the film, as the film has become the property of the New Auteur, the product placer, the corporate huckster. The New Auteur movement is broken down into various stages of product promotion, culminating in the arrangement of movies specifically as vehicles for products. Regardless of the reaction of legislators or regulators, those who teach visual literacy need to teach the audiences of films to view them critically. (Contains 36 references.) (SLD)

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For Whom the Bell Tolls and The Birth of the New Auteur Movement

by
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"Do you want to be in pictures?" This is a typical question you might ask of an inspired individual, with starry eyes and big ambitions. But this is perhaps not the typical question to be posed to a multi-ton, massive yellow object. But in today's world of film that would indeed be an appropriate question you might ask of Caterpillar Tractor Company. You see, The Big Yellow Giant, as it is known, hired a product placement firm to find work in the movies and television for its yellow offspring. Caterpillar, like many other firms, has indeed found starring roles in movies through product placement firms and herein lies the problem.

Hugo Munsterberg said, "A good photoplay [film] must be isolated and complete in itself like a beautiful melody. It is not an advertisement for the newest fashions" (Munsterberg, 1979). Yet, unfortunately, that is exactly what the film industry is, an advertisement for the latest fashion and more. It failed miserably to isolate itself from advertising and, in fact, what the motion picture industry cranks out is feature length commercials.

What follows is a discussion of the state of the motion picture industry today, which is not pretty nor is it pleasant to think about, but we need to force ourselves to do just that! We, as individuals researching visual literacy, consumers and critics of the medium, need to demand change in the practice of product placement.

Why should those of us interested in visual literacy be greatly concerned about an entertainment medium when there are a great deal of other more pressing issues confronting us on the education front? Surely there are more appropriate topics that ought to occupy the minds of our researchers and academicians, right? Indeed, we are faced with other issues to consider, but the study of the placement of advertisements in film should be of paramount interest to our field. The product placers are applying the tools of our trade to advertise their products by using the visual medium to present and sell their products to innocent and naive entertainment seekers. They carefully analyze and read the text to find the best means to present their advertisement, which is often nonverbal. The power of this visual medium to influence buying behavior is tremendous. All one has to do is examine the success of Reese's Pieces after its appearance in *ET*. Film also conveys the implied product endorsement by the character and, to a lesser extent, the actor's themselves. Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance* drinks a Diet Pepsi after a rigorous workout. Thus, if she

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drinks Diet Pepsi in the movie, then she must really drink it in real life. People view films and television and are socialized by them. The populus is educated by film and television as well. For example, we know historically in film that good guys wear white hats and ride white horses. To imitate one's favorite hero used to require only wearing a white hat, riding a white horse—even if it were a broom, we play acted as if it were a majestic white stallion. Now however, viewers see time after time that heros drink Pepsi. To mimic one's hero today requires brand preference.

We need to critically analyze the impact of the message which is enveloped into character and plot development. The process by which humans come to understand the world around them is based on the stimuli that they perceive. If a large portion of this stimuli falls within the medium of film and later as programming on television, then we need to educate the consumers on the potential manipulation of our perceptions. We need to make viewers aware that Rocky only ate Wheaties because Wheaties paid big bucks for him to do so. Many are not visually literate, visually aware, and don't see these product placements as advertisements. To this end, we need to educate and inform the viewer. We can point to many tragedies and ills that come about due to an uninformed people. Finally, many of the consumers of the medium are children, the same group of individuals that are "protected" while viewing Saturday morning cartoons by the use of bumpers which separate the programming material from the commercial material. We do not have such luxury in films. The advertisements are intertwined with the plot and script and become inseparable. In some examples, such as *Mac and Me*, the product is the film, but this will be discussed in greater detail later. So yes, examining the visual (sometimes verbal) exposure products get in films is a very appropriate topic of study. This is an industry out of hand. What the film industry needs is self-regulation and, if necessary, imposed regulation by Congress and the Federal Communication Commission to prohibit product placements in future films. If prohibition is not the avenue taken, then films need to label all product placements at the time of placement in the film, as a paid advertisement. This is what is needed. And the time is now!

The bell indeed tolls for the creative juices which once raced through Hollywood. Gone from the film industry are the great directors such as Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Frank Capra, and John Ford. The high point in film has passed. What has replaced them is an unfortunate lot. Sure, American films were always expected to make a profit, but the method of making a profit today has caused the removal of the director from being the auteur (author or primary source of creativity) of the film. No longer is the director the person in charge of interpreting a screen play and "writing it" in his or her own style. Films no longer belong to the director at all. The film is the property of the "New Auteur": the product placer, the advertising huckster and corporate America with products to push. Films made today amount to no more than feature length commercials—shot for television, full of spectacle, wrapped around a plot which affords the most guest appearances for the stars—the almighty **PRODUCT!** This is sad but true—and many of the directors currently working in film have sold out to this practice. Yes, the bell does toll for each and every one of us who enjoyed a good film on a Saturday afternoon at the old Bijou.

The discussion in this paper will utilize an historical-critical approach to describe the use of product placements in films, a critical evaluation of where this trend has taken the industry, its effects on consumers and finally what action can be taken in the future. In an effort to organize events for the reader, the paper is broken down into stages of development. And finally, the approach to this paper assumes the basic premise that the auteur of a film is the person primarily responsible for the style and treatment of subject matter as well as the creative look of a film, thus the "author". In the past, the auteur has been the director. I propose this is no longer the case and that there is a new auteur.

The "New Auteur" movement can be broken down into the following stages: Acme Reality, "Ad"-ded Reality, and Anti-Reality! The last stage is a term which has roots in an article by Mark Miller, *Hollywood: the Ad*, 1990. I think it is a perfect descriptor for this stage—and many of the points Miller brings up in that article also bears mentioning later as well.

ACME REALITY

Early directors were careful to conceal the identity of an item, label it generically or with a made up name. ACME, Wham and Ajax are examples of products that were simply made up. The "generic" labeling of a product did not stand out and scream "I am PRODUCT X—Mr./Ms. Movie star used me, if you want to be more like them, all you need to do is buy me" like it does in today's film. If you don't believe me, ask any kid who saw *ET* what kind of candy the outer-space creature liked. In the "good old days," people didn't notice the product—that is, there was no brand identification. (Brand identification is something that product placers are currently selling to corporate America.) And as a result of the lack of brand identification, the audience's attention wasn't distracted from the plot.

This is not true today. Look at any number of films, *Back to the Future* (any in the series will do), *Rocky I* and any other commercial sequels that followed, *Mr. Mom, Flashdance, Field of Dreams, Mr. Destiny, Chances Are, Tootsie...* and the list continues. Certainly many can recall specific products from any of these films—actually, product placers would be more than happy to share the results of their research which indicates that audiences' "...recognition of specific products has ranged from as high as 96 percent...to as low as 12 percent" (Poe, 1984). And since we can recall a product, it is this very ability that is distracting from the true content film. In films of the acme-reality stage, one does not have that problem. Take the film *It's A Wonderful Life*, as a perfect example of an acme-reality film. Can you imagine, just for a minute, that the drug store in Bedford Falls that George Baily worked at was Super X and he fixed up the ol' Grandville house using Craftsmen tools (Bob Villa would be a special guest star)—let's not forget the real estate salesman who sold the house was in a yellow coat and the sign in the yard said Century 21—the bottle of champagne given to George and Mary by Bert the cop was Asti Spumante—the clothing George and Mary borrowed after falling into the pool were Calvin Klein—Zuzu's rose pedals were from the FTD Florist—(Merlin Olson would have delivered them) and Ernie's Taxi Cab would be, of course, Yellow Cab. Would the film have the long lasting staying power if the above were true? I seriously doubt it. I am, however, pretty positive that if Disney were to shoot *Bambi* today, Thumper would be the Energizer Rabbit.

"AD"-DED REALITY

The practice of placing products in films isn't a new concept at all. Actually there are some examples dating back to the 1940's. In *across the board,* Randall Poe writes "brand-name products have appeared sporadically in movies over the years, usually because a filmmaker was doing a special favor for a friend..."(Poe, 1984). Edward Epstein wrote in *The Rise and Fall of Diamonds*, that the advertising agency for De Beers Consolidated Mines, the diamond giant, was successful in convincing Paramount "...in changing the title [of a film] from 'Diamonds are Dangerous' to 'Adventures in Diamonds' "(Epstein, 1982). All in all, examples such as the above are exceptions rather than the rule. Early stages of product placement consisted of a firm giving free products for the duration of the filming in hopes that their products would end up in the final cutting of the movie. It wasn't until much later — around 1979 — that such "convenient placement" became a big business.

Robert Kovoloff and his placement firm Associated Film Promotions is "considered the founder of the business..."(Rosenthal, 1989, p. 44). He, like other placers, poured over scripts in an attempt to find areas that could be filled with products from the clients that he represented. He then would go to the producer and demonstrate what their firm could provide for the film. The studios were only too eager to take these freebies in an effort to keep their cost down, even if it meant shooting a scene with a real product rather than a made-up firm's product as we had previously seen in acme realism stage or a prop they had to purchase or rent.

These early entrepreneurs like Kovoloff saw an opportunity to make big bucks—and indeed, did so. Generally product placement firms work on a one-time yearly fee from a client. For that fee, depending on the product, they promise "X" many placements in films a year. The general number of films vary, but the magic number seems to be five. And, if the product gets left on the cutting room floor, as did the Independent Insurance Agents billboard in the movie *The Natural*, that's okay, there will always be the next film. "'It was worth the effort,' said Mr. Vinson [Senior Vice President of Communication for IIAA]" (Friedman, 1984). No big deal. Remember, this is the early days of product placement we're talking about. It all changes and rapidly so.

Just as the number of films a product appears in, the one-time fee varies with firms as well. Joseph Bohn wrote in *Automotive News* that the fee "could range anywhere from $50,000 to $200,000" (Bohn,1986a). Edmond Rosenthal stated the fee "has gone as high as $250,000" (Rosenthal, 1989). The higher fees are generally associated with the Anti-reality stage. There will be more discussion later on dollar amounts charged.

During the "Ad"-ded Reality stage, there was some concern for the appearance of propriety. "Another cautionary note: product placements should not be overtly commercial," warns Robert Finehout in the Public Relations Journal (Finehout, 1985). Evidently, not many heeded this warning in 1985 since more and more product placements crept into the scripts, not just adding reality, as was argued earlier, but creating reality—advertiser's reality. With this, we usher in the Anti-reality stage.

ANTI-REALITY:

There are quite a few changes between the added reality stage and the anti-reality stage. Anti-reality stage saw an increase in the amount of control delivered into the hands of the product placers and to a lesser extent the firms the placers represented. Greed on the part of the studios aided and allowed this to occur. No longer were placement firms just looking over the scripts to see where their client's product might be used in a film, but placers would have scripts rewritten to include a verbal reference to a client's product or actual usage by an actor. Film producers were only too happy to accommodate the rewrite—for a larger fee. The studios also became major brokers in the placement of products in this stage as well.

As product placement became more of a "legitimate" business, with research to back up the sales pitch, the money charged to a client increased and so did the demand on the part of the client about the particulars of film placement. Anti-reality stage saw the rise to companies becoming more concerned with the appropriateness of the film their product and firm was to star in. The fit has to be right. MasterCard® was discouraged "...from participating in ...*Death Wish III*" (Spillman, 1985) by Rich Gore, its placer, "...it takes place in the ghetto and shows lots of people getting blown away. I don't think that would do MasterCard® any good'" (Ibid), Gore says. This is truly anti-reality, in that bad guys use MasterCards® as well as the good guys do (perhaps even more, not just their own cards either). The plastic gets plunked down on counters on Rodeo Drive and Fifth Avenue just as it does in Harlem. So the product placers concern for MasterCard's® "appropriateness" in a film no longer means that they were (as if they ever were really) concerned with boosting the reality of a film. Product placers are more concerned with image control of their products. We have the ultimate in anti-reality by the product placers not placing a product in a film because of the image. If they were wanting to really portray reality, then they would place the credit card in the film and show both legitimate and illicit uses of the card. This is how it appears in real world reality. So the lack of placement in this case is paramount to anti-reality.

Notice the concern of the "appropriateness" of MasterCard® in this film. This is indeed an example of a strong negative visual image and MasterCard® does not want the audience to wrongly learn from this negative visual.

Yet on the other hand, the placement of 7-Eleven stores in the movie *Cannonball Run* was anti-reality in that the only station that Burt Reynolds stopped at in his cross country adventure was 7-Eleven. The producer of *Cannonball Run*, Albert Ruddy explains, "'...If your film is crossing 3,000 miles of the U.S., you can't keep pulling into gas stations and convenience stores which have no names'" (Poe, 1984). This is really absurd reasoning. It is a classic case of anti-realism because of the exclusive placement of 7-Eleven. It is anti-realism to propose that someone is going to: a. always fill up at the same brand name gas station. b. always find the same brand name gas station when they need gas. The statement that Burt couldn't pull into gas stations and convenience stores which have no names is anti-realistic, in that there are quite a few of each without much more than "Dick's Gas and Food For Less" as the name. "Mom and Pop" still live and still own stores, restaurants, gas stations and their ilk.

Product placers are commanding and getting enormous amounts of control in the early stages of anti-reality. They are now exhibiting overt characteristics signaling the final stages of metamorphosis of the new auteurs. One product placer is quoted as saying, "'We choose the projects where we have maximum control....We break a film down and tell the producers exactly where we want to see our clients' brands'" (Miller,1990).

To further illustrate the power of the New Auteurs, consider that a "...scene in *Cocoon: The Return* was reshot so that Quaker Instant Oatmeal could be displayed more prominently" (Reed, 1989). This too, is an identifiable trait of the New Auteurs.

Remember the Independent Insurance Agents billboard getting left on the cutting room floor? The attitude during the "ad"-ded reality stage was "Oh well, there will always be the next film...". In the Anti-reality stage, this has changed. Strategies for placements now exist. For example, in the film *Die Hard 2,* there was scene where Bruce Willis was to use a cordless screwdriver. Through the product placement firm and the advertising manager at Black & Decker, a deal was cut to use a Black & Decker Univolt drill. There was even discussion of working the tag line of Black & Decker into the script. The product placement firm even provided evidence that this would be ideal for Black & Decker, "This hands-on usage in a heroic effort will make a memorable impact upon the film's audience. Research indicates that this type of film exposure results in brand recall two and a half times greater than that of television commercial advertising (a 56 percent average recall, compared with a 22 percent average for television)" (*Harper's Magazine*,1991). As it turned out (if you haven't guessed already), the scene which featured the drill was cut from the film. Instead of "Oh well, there will be other films," Black & Decker has "...filed a $150,000 lawsuit against [Twentieth Century] Fox..."(*Harper's Magazine*, 1991). Firms are no longer content with the notion that another film will come along.

The practice of placers "assisting in reality" by supplying products for films, while collecting huge profits for themselves continued for the formative years (the "ad"-ded reality stage) of the business. But soon, however, it dawned on many of the studios, probably much like the awakening by the first proprietor of the "world's oldest profession", why give away a very desirous product that someone else is willing to pay good money for. It seemed kind of silly, in retrospect, that someone else would be selling the studios product for a huge profit, and studios were getting a very small return for their participation, so why not cut out the middleman or at the very least cut themselves in for a piece of the money pie. And that's where we are today. *Time* reported "'Walt Disney Co. [is] soliciting paid product placements in a new film, *Mr. Destiny* '" (*Time*, 1990). They are selling off parts in the script to firms willing to pay— "'...$20,000 for a visual, $40,000 for a brand name mention with a visual and $60,000 for an actor to use the product'" (Ibid.).

If this sounds as if filmmakers are tailoring a script for a certain firm's products, it should. The script was changed in *Rosemary's Baby* to include a reference to Lipton's Tea (Finehout,1985). One could pick any number of scenes in *Murphey's Romance,* a Coca-Cola/ Columbia Pictures production starring Sally Field and James Garner to prove this point. "Sally even asks James at one point in the movie, "'Could I have two Extra-Strength

Tylenol and a glass of water please "'(Miller, 1990, p. 44)?

Not only are scripts being written and rewritten for products depending on what the parent firm decides to pay, but in some films, complete television commercials are being worked into the films as well. In the movie *Power*, Richard Gere watches an Aim toothpaste commercial on television (Spillman,1985). *Johnny Be Good* features a commercial for shoe-giant Adidas (Sheinfeld, 1989). Peter Sellers watches a commercial for Natural Light in his film *Being There*. And the coup of commercial placements goes to *Lethal Weapon 2* which features a commercial for Ramses condoms. Not only does Ramses get a commercial in the film, but they also get a running joke throughout the movie (*Newsweek*, 1989).

If you have a product, the new auteurs can fashion a movie out of it, even it requires stealing a plot, as a vehicle for your product. Enter *Mac and Me*. *Mac and Me*, is a feature length commercial made entirely as a vehicle for Coca-Cola, McDonalds, and Sears. The producer, R.J. Louis denies that his intention was "'...to focus on a product'" (Skenazy, 1988). He's probably telling the truth, right? It's only a coincidence that there is a connection between these firms right? So McDonalds has a line of clothing that is sold through Sears—McKids, and Coca-Cola is the drink served at McDonalds. Just coincidence. And in the *ET* rip-off film, the MAC (Any chance of this being a coincidence, that MAC could stand for a restaurant chain or a certain hamburger?) is an alien who survives by drinking Coke. The listing of coincidences between the three firms and their intertwining in the plot(?) could go on to an ad nauseam degree, so I'll quit. P.S., Guess who also stars in this film? You guessed it, Ronald McDonald. The plot was stolen from ET, a wildly successful film during the "ad"-ded reality stage which launched the product placement business into its current greedy orbit. *ET* made Reese's Pieces a household word and caused sales to skyrocket "...150% in two months...[which] pushed Hershey Chocolate's sales to an estimated $1.2 billion, vs. 1981's $1 billion, and its operating income to $185 million, vs. 142.7 million" (S&MM,1983). Not bad returns for appearing in a movie, no wonder Mac and Me attempted to duplicate that for its sponsors.

Probably the most impacting of product placements has to deal with changing the image of the main character in the preeminent series of the spy genre films. James Bond dumped his trademark Austin Martin automobile for a Lincoln Continental Mark VII (Reed, 1989). But that's not the best of the James Bond world of placement. Guess what kind of cigarette Bond smokes? Larks. And for that, parent company, Phillip Morris paid a cool $350,000 (Miller, 1990). In the "ad"-ded reality stage, a mere $50,000 was sufficient in getting one's product into as many as five films—sometimes more. Well, $350,000 is a far cry from those days. But more important than the amount of money—don't get me wrong, this is very important, but a more pressing concern is the control over not only the script but the identity of a character. James Bond! The name in itself depicts a certain connotation, a certain imagery. James Bond is the exalted deity of the spy genre, which glorifies among other things, the conspicuous consumption of expensive items and gadgets. These items are not the things that ordinary citizens might have, but something special, something awe inspiring, something worthy of such greatness. By the simple fact that Bond no longer drives an Austin-Martin or smokes perhaps Italian cigarettes,

the product placers are impacting a genre. A good argument might be mounted that the new James Bond films are no longer a part of the spy genre because one of this most basic and important elements have been removed—James Bond as a romantic hero, being superior to everyone else and having more power as well is gone. Yes, James Bond is one of us. He is no better than the overweight Detective Frank Cannon, of the television series *Cannon*, as he too, drove a Lincoln. No other conclusion can be made.

The new auteurs have also changed the film style. This is evident in the anti-reality stage. No longer are films shot for the big silver screen, but for television. Gone are the rich deep focus shots of Welles and the panoramic view of a John Ford western. Left in its place is the close-up with the foreground emphasized. For proof of this one needs to look only as far as *Rocky III* when Stallone tries to convince his son that "Wheaties is the Breakfast of Champions." Or as Vincent Canby stated in the *New York Times* about the movie *Little Treasure*, "'The containers of Coke don't actually receive more closeups than Miss Kidder, but their closeups seem more lingering and loving'" (Spillman,1985). No longer do we need to letter box films so we won't miss anything, the technique employed by the New Auteurs insures that everything falls within the essential area, displayed prominently.

The main reason for this shift of technique is the impact the new auteurs (the product placers) have over the film. They realized early in the "ad"-ded reality stage that the film has a much longer afterlife on television than the life span during the theatrical release. Soon it would show up on pay per view, subscription television, video cassettes, foreign release and eventually on broadcast television. The larger audience for any given film is after the theatrical release, Sheinfeld reported "...30 to 40 million viewers for a film's first release and with over 200 million thereafter" (Sheinfeld, 1989). and the new auteurs are filming with those numbers in mind. In the early days of television, with its insatiable appetite for programming, it looked to feature films as a potential supplier of material. Now, however, the film industry looks to television as the primary outlet for its product. Again, this is evident through the applied use of the new film technique.

Given the above fact that television is the primary outlet source of theatrical film releases, the Federal Communications Commission now has jurisdiction over product placement. The Communication Act of 1934, Section 317 requires an announcement "...for which any money, service or other valuable consideration is directly or indirectly paid..."(*Documents Of American Broadcasting*, 1978). But there is a waiver for theatrical films, because it was felt that theatrical films were "...produced principally for theaters..."(*Broadcasting*,1989). This no longer holds true today. Theatrical films are primary made for television, which brings up even more issues, such as James Bond smoking Lark cigarettes. Phillip Morris paid for that placement which is tantamount to a commercial. Congress banned "...all cigarette commercials on radio and television effective January 2, 1971... "(*Documents of American Broadcasting*, 1978). We now have a legality question over the airing of films which contain any product placements of cigarettes by cigarette manufacturers. The Center for Science in the Public Interest has petitioned the Federal Communications Commission to rescind the

portion of its 1960 product identification and sponsorship statue (Section 317 of the Communications Act) to "...require a conspicuous disclosure every time a paid product placement is depicted" (*Broadcasting*,1989). "'Today's product placements, intended to persuade unsuspecting audiences, violate the principle that the public has the right to know who is trying to persuade it'"(*Broadcasting*, 1989). Marshall McLuhan seems to support this view when he sees, "...the film medium as monster ad for consumer goods. In America this major aspect of film is merely subliminal" (McLuhan, 1964).

The Anti-reality stage seems to be plugging along, digging itself deeper and deeper into the mire of an increasing anti-realistic world, while the New Auteur's continue their rhetoric of "increased reality through product placement" in an effort to keep the audience hoodwinked into what is really happening to the artform called film.

Where are we to turn? The film industry has yet to regulate itself—or see a need to. With the current mind set such as film director John Badham (*Short Circuit*) has, we can expect little change. He stated, "'If we can help each other, and it doesn't intrude on the movie, it's fine'" (Reed,1989). We can't expect the change to come from the New Auteurs--the studios or from the product placers, after all, it is their movement. It is uncertain at this writing what the FCC plans to do, if anything. Congress too, has yet to act on the idea of product placement in movies. Yet, one would think that there would be a public outcry. And if not by the public, where are the critics? Where are the formalists? Rudolf Arnheim and company, are you watching what is occurring? We need help! The bell is tolling for the death of an artform! Shall it die an undignified death? Won't anyone stand up and say something in its defense? Or are we all to wait, until it is too late, to speak our peace, in the form of a eulogy? Perhaps the New Auteur Movement, with its view of "reality" will pass, much like the movements which preceded it—leaving its mark on time as a reflection of an era past—just as the drawings of a caveman and the hieroglyphics of ancient Egyptians. Perhaps it will pass...or become the hieroglyphics of today!

Many points and questions have been raised in this paper, questions that do not have answers. But be sure of one point, we need to educate the audience. We need to teach critical viewing skills. Many researchers have talked about teaching critical viewing skills, but have often overlooked this aspect of film and television. The importance of deconstructionalism in the approach of critically analyzing the medium's message is vitally important. Those of us studying and teaching visual literacy need to discuss this area in your research and lesson plans. Certainly we are faced with a death of an artform, but we are also faced with the duping of a public.

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